



S'pore's political awakening likely to impact Johor



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With more than half a million Malaysians working in Singapore, the apparent political shift in the Singapore election campaign is set to shake Malaysia's political landscape, especially in the southern state of Johor - deemed to be Umno last bastion in the peninsula.

In this polls, described by many as the toughest battle faced by ruling party People's Action Party (PAP) since 1960s, the opposition campaign had gained impressive momentum, reflected by the attendance of animated crowds numbering in the tens of thousands at their mega-rallies over the past few days.

It has not only rung the PAP's alarm bell but also received wide coverage from both the international and Malaysian media.

"No question, Singapore's political opening will shape all those who are here to see politics differently, whether they are from Malaysia or Indonesia," said Bridget Welsh, an associate professor in political science at the Singapore Management University.



She pointed out that the island republic's good governance, security, better salaries and better provision of social services, which remain challenges in Malaysia, will have salience in Malaysian politics.

"My own view is that Johor will be one of the battleground areas for the Malaysia's next general election, as Sarawak was recently," she said.

Umno was founded in Johor and the state remained a BN stronghold, weathering the 'political tsunami' of the polls.

Effects of close proximity

Most Malaysians working in Singapore are either residing in Johor or originate from the southern state and travel daily to the island through the 1km-long causeway.

The influence of Singapore on Johor is strengthened by the fact that Chinese Johoreans, especially those living at the southern part of the state, are loyal audience of Singapore's Mandarin TV channels.

Therefore, some quarters used to attribute the Chinese Johoreans' long-time loyalty to the BN to the influence of Singapore's paternalistic politics practised by the ruling PAP.



On the other hand, observers of both Malaysia and Singapore politics believe that the 'political tsunami' in Malaysia 2008 general election and the opposition historic breakthrough in the recent Sarawak state polls have contributed partly to the sudden surge in support for the opposition in Singapore.

"I do believe that there has been an international symbolic affect on the strengthening of the opposition in Singapore, especially the impact of Malaysia," said Welsh (*left*).

She pointed out that the Singapore opposition, comprising six major parties, has seen the need to be unified and work together from Malaysia.

"It has seen the importance of common messaging from places such as Malaysia and Taiwan.

"The Pakatan Rakyat governments of Penang and Selangor have opened the eyes of Singaporeans, that alternatives do not necessarily fail," said Welsh in an email interview with *Malaysiakini*.

Changes spread by air

"It is important not to discount the 'AirAsia' effect of greater exposure to diversity in the neighbourhood and broader global media coverage of changes in places such as the Middle East," she added, referring to Malaysia's low-cost air carrier providing budget flights to Southeast Asian countries.



Senior fellow with Singapore-based Institute of South East Asia Studies (ISEAS) Ooi Kee Beng concurred.

"It is hard to say it doesn't connect (to Malaysia politics). There are half a million Malaysians here and Malaysia is the country that is most reported about by the mainstream media here," he said when contacted yesterday.

Due to the frequent interaction between the peoples of both countries, it is believed the election results announced tomorrow will have reciprocal impact on Malaysian politics.

"I do believe that the core issues of Singapore's campaign - inequality, cost of living, housing and healthcare - have extreme salience in Malaysia.

"They were very powerful in 2008 and are likely to be so in any future campaign in Malaysia. These issues affect all ethnic communities across races," said Welsh.

Singapore's experience, she said, has made many Malaysians there to understand the need for a social welfare system that works and for a fairer system, even amidst economic success.

"Economic growth is not enough for quality of life. Those being left out need to be addressed," she added.

Cyberspace kicks in hard



Meanwhile, Ooi (*left*) pointed out that the two countries, separated in 1965 due to a political divide, shared much common ground in their elections, particularly the emergence of the new generation of voters who, empowered by online new media, are willing to stand up to traditional authority.

"Regardless of the election results, something had already happened here. The culture of fear is broken, people do not fear threats anymore," said Ooi, adding that this polls will be a watershed in Singapore's political history.

"I also see the impact of the new media and a greater willingness to speak out as most recently in the Middle East and earlier in Malaysia," added Welsh.

Similar to Malaysia, due to the muzzled mainstream media and the emergence of information technology-savvy young voters, new media like Facebook and Twitter have become an important platform for the opposition campaign.

The Internet effect in Singapore played a more significant role than in Malaysia as it is one of the countries with highest smart phone penetration in the world.

Ooi observed that the new media had forced the Singapore mainstream media to allow space for issues and messages hotly debated in cyberspace.

"If they don't say things there (in the Internet), they would look silly."

Indeed the state-controlled mainstream media had adopted some bold actions in this election such as airing live debates of representatives from both sides and giving more coverage to the opposition.

However Ooi noted that its election coverage was still lopsided with the ratio of ruling and opposition news standing at 70:30.

Bloated egos may get comeuppance

Although bread-and-butter issue compounded by the huge influx of immigrants in recent years resonated well with voter sentiment, Ooi believed that the political elitism and arrogance demonstrated by PAP leaders will be the major factor that may swing the votes away from PAP.

"The ministers replied to the issues raised by the opposition in a strange matter. They seemed disconnected from what the people worry about."

The same arrogance and elitism had been reflected by the BN and Umno in Malaysia's last polls that cost them their two-thirds parliamentary majority.

However, Ooi observed that PAP's campaign managed to adapt itself to the new political reality faster unlike their Malaysian counterparts.

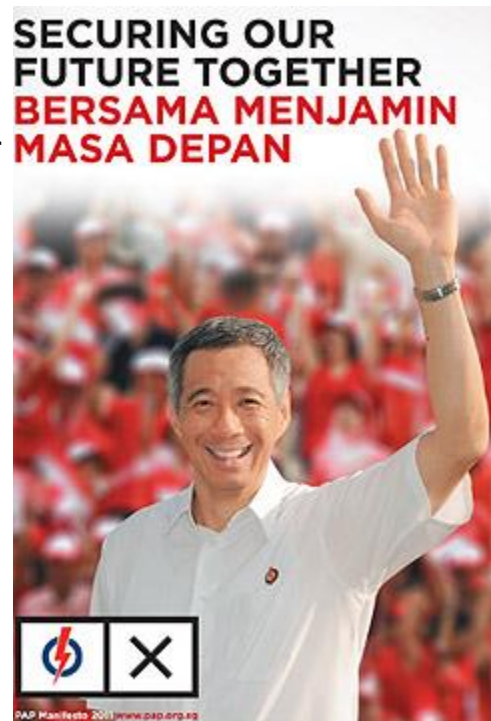
"They moved much faster compared to Umno, more pre-emptive... They have the ability to adjust."

This was illustrated by the quick response of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (*right*) to distance the party from his father and Singapore founding father Lee Kuan Yew, after the latter warned the voters of hot-seat Aljunied that they would have "five years to live and repent" should they vote against the PAP.

The son who is also PAP secretary-general responded by saying that the strongman politics practised by his father was no longer suitable for Singapore.

This was followed by an open apology to Singaporeans for the government's mistakes and gaffes since the last polls, including the escape of suspected terrorist Mas Selamat and the Orchard Road flooding.

On this, Ooi pointed out that PAP leadership has already started the process of softening its political approach since 1990s under the leadership of the then prime minister Goh Chok Tong, gradually moving away from the old paternalistic style leadership.



Nevertheless, while Malaysians are experiencing the emergence of a vibrant two-party system after 2008, their neighbours still have a long way to go before catching up.

"They are only prepared to have an opposition that they can take seriously," Ooi said.